

ADHD Overview



What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) affects a child's ability to control attention and behavior. Children with ADHD may have trouble paying attention, controlling impulsive behaviors, and/or being overly active. These attention and behavior challenges can lead to problems at home, school, and in relationships.

How is ADHD Tested and Diagnosed?

There is no single test for ADHD. Determining if your child has ADHD is a multi-step process, and the first step should be to speak with your child's healthcare clinician about evaluating your child for ADHD.

The evaluation will most likely include interviews to understand developmental and medical history; collecting behavior rating scales from caregivers, teachers, and others who know the child well; conducting a medical exam in some cases; and when possible, conducting direct observations of the child.

To be diagnosed with ADHD, the following criteria must be met:

1. Child displays six or more symptoms of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity over the past six months.
2. Child displays symptoms in two or more settings (e.g., home and school)
3. Symptoms interfere with or reduce the quality of child's daily life

What are ADHD Symptoms?

Many ADHD symptoms, such as having difficulty paying attention or sitting still, are common in young children at times. For children with ADHD, their inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity goes beyond what is expected of children their age and gets in the way of their daily lives.

Based on the types of symptoms, three presentations of ADHD can occur:

Predominantly inattentive presentation	Predominantly hyperactive-impulsive presentation	Combined presentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not pay close attention to details, make careless mistakes • Have difficulty staying focused • Do not appear to listen • Struggle with following instructions • Have difficulty getting organized • Avoid or dislike tasks that require a lot of mental effort • Lose things • Are easily distracted • Forget to do daily activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fidgets with hands or feet, squirms in seat • Have difficulty staying seated • Run around or climb excessively • Have difficulty working or playing quietly • Always “on the go,” motorized • Talk a lot • Blurt out answers before a question has been finished • Have difficulty waiting or taking turns • Interrupt or intrude upon others 	<p>Children are hyperactive, impulsive, and have trouble paying attention.</p>

What Causes ADHD?

ADHD is a complex disorder with many possible causes. Though there is not one definitive cause of ADHD, research suggests that it is largely a genetic disorder. Other factors include:

- Premature birth
- Low birthweight
- Alcohol and tobacco use during pregnancy
- Exposure to environmental toxins during pregnancy or at a young age.

Research does not support views that ADHD is caused by eating too much sugar, poor parenting, or a chaotic family life. Although not considered causes of ADHD, parenting style and home environment can be changed to help manage ADHD symptoms.

How is ADHD Treated?

Many treatment options are available for ADHD. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends both behavior therapy and medication as good options, and the combination is preferable for most children.

Behavior Therapy

The goal of behavior therapy is to reduce negative behaviors and to encourage positive ones. Behavior therapy that incorporates behavior management training for parents and teachers is most common for young and school-age children, and it focuses on providing parents and teachers with the skills to best support and guide their children's behavior. Behavior therapy may involve working directly with children when they are older or if they need help with other concerns besides ADHD.

Medications

Healthcare clinicians may prescribe ADHD medications if a child is experiencing symptoms of ADHD and difficulties at home or school. Different medications and doses can have different effects on children, so it is important to work with a healthcare clinician to find the best medication for your child.

- *Stimulants* are the most widely used medicine to treat ADHD. Stimulants have been found to improve attention, motivation, self-control, and movement in children with ADHD.
- *Non-stimulants* are another common medicine for children with ADHD and are typically used for children who do not respond well to stimulants. Non-stimulants help improve attention and hyperactivity, but they may take a longer time to have a full effect.

Other Treatments

Other treatments shown to help children with ADHD include:

- Family education about diagnosis and treatment
- School services and supports
- Organization skills training.

How Can More People Receive Treatment?

Although ADHD symptoms can be successfully treated, many factors make it difficult getting access to high-quality care, including:

- Childcare concerns
- Financial and insurance issues
- Limited transportation
- Limited schedule flexibility
- Lack of trust in the healthcare system and/or healthcare clinicians
- Stigma related to mental health care
- Time constraints for educators and clinicians
- Lack of coordinated care between school, primary care, and behavioral health systems.

These barriers can be especially challenging for families living in low-income, urban settings. To overcome these barriers, it is crucial to create more accessible, culturally sensitive treatments and care models for all families.